

THE RIO GRANDE CORRIDOR FINAL PLAN

JANUARY 2000



**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
NEW MEXICO/COLORADO**



The Bureau of Land Management...

Is responsible for the balanced management of the public lands and resources and their various values so that they are considered in a combination that will best serve the needs of the American people. Management is based upon the principles of multiple use and sustained yield, a combination of uses that takes into account the long-term needs of future generations for renewable and non-renewable resources. These resources include recreation, range, timber, minerals, watershed, fish and wildlife, wilderness, and natural, scenic, scientific, and cultural values.



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Taos Field Office	La Jara Field Office
226 Cruz Alta Road	15571 County Road T5
Taos, New Mexico 87571	La Jara, Colorado 81140

January 4, 2000

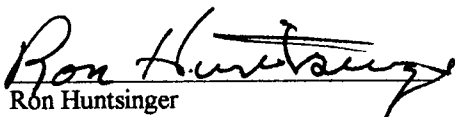
Dear Reader:

This document is the final version of the Rio Grande Corridor Plan, which provides management guidance for public lands along the Rio Grande in New Mexico (Taos Field Office) and in Colorado (La Jara Field Office) and amends the Taos Resource Management Plan. The plan provides a vision for managing the natural resources in the corridor from La Sauses, Colorado to Velarde, New Mexico, and is the result of over 5 years of work with individuals, community groups, the outfitting industry and federal, state and local governments. The enclosed final version of the Rio Grande Corridor Plan is a refinement of the Proposed Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement published in August, 1998.

The planning process for the Rio Grande Corridor was concluded with the January 4, 2000 signing of the Record of Decision approving the Taos Resource Management Plan amendments and the activity-level management direction outlined in the Final Plan.

We appreciate the effort many of you have made to participate in the planning process. There will be many opportunities for public involvement in implementing this plan. Continued public involvement in implementing planned actions will allow us to effectively manage the public lands and resources in the Rio Grande Corridor.

Sincerely,



Ron Huntsinger
Taos Field Manager



Carlos Pinto
La Jara Field Manager

Final Rio Grande Corridor
Coordinated Resource Management Plan
and Taos Resource Management Plan Amendments

THE RIO GRANDE CORRIDOR FINAL PLAN

January 2000

United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
New Mexico/Colorado

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CHAPTER 1



INTRODUCTION

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The Rio Grande Corridor Final Plan describes strategies for managing the public lands and allocating resources along 94 miles of the Rio Grande and some 43 miles of its tributaries (refer to Maps 1 and 2). The document describes amendments to the Taos Resource Management Plan (RMP - 1988, also amended in 1991 and 1994). The Final Plan and the

Environmental Impact Statement were prepared according to the requirements of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and the National Environmental Policy Act. The Record of Decision for the Final Plan was signed on January 4, 2000, and is available from the Taos and La Jara Field Offices.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The Rio Grande Corridor planning area includes public land within the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM's) La Jara Field Office (formerly San Luis Resource Area) in south-central Colorado and Taos Field Office (formerly Taos Resource Area) in north-central New Mexico. BLM managers in Colorado and New Mexico recognized the interdependence of the people, land and natural resources along the northern portion of the Rio Grande and the efficiencies of a single, cooperative, coordinated resource planning effort. So this document is a little different than the usual because it includes two very different levels of BLM planning. Through this document the BLM prepared an activity-level coordinated resource management plan for the public land within the Rio Grande Corridor, and also amended the Taos RMP. The San Luis RMP is not being amended.

Planning efforts for the Rio Grande Corridor formally began in 1994, but the Final Plan is the result of

extensive public participation that began many years earlier. Changes in recreation use and public demand, wildlife habitat, and ecosystem caused concerns have caused the BLM to take a comprehensive look at its management of public land within the Rio Grande Corridor. Additional factors contributing to the decision to prepare this plan included RMP prescriptions for both field offices, new management proposals that would not have been in conformance with the Taos RMP and Public Law 103-242 (May 4, 1994). This Wild & Scenic River legislation added a 12-mile segment of the Rio Grande (from the Taos Junction Bridge to just below the County Line Recreation Site) to the National Wild & Scenic River system. The legislation also mandated a suitability study of a 7.6-mile segment of the Rio Grande below the County Line Recreation Site to the Velarde Diversion Dam for consideration as a possible addition to the National Wild & Scenic River System. Studies for these segments were not included in the Taos RMP.

PLANNING PROCESS

The overall objective of resource management planning as prescribed by the BLM Planning Regulations (Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 1600) is to provide a sound basis for systematically evaluating and deciding uses of the public lands. The BLM develops three types of plans: RMPs (and RMP Amendments), Activity Plans (such as coordinated resource management plans), and Project Plans. This planning process included both an amendment to the Taos RMP and an activity-level plan for the Rio Grande Corridor planning area.

The process focused on planning issues, which are significant problems, concerns, or opportunities that strongly affect management direction. Issues were identified by the general public, American Indian tribes, other federal agencies, state and local governments; and BLM staff and managers. The

following issues became the focal point of this plan:

Issue 1: In New Mexico only, determine the suitability of and protective measures for the wild and scenic qualities of the Rio Grande, Rio Embudo, and 12 streams are legislative and planning mandates.

Issue 2: Protection of riparian areas; conflicts with recreation, grazing, other resource uses and with the development of recreational facilities.

Issue 3: Soils, vegetation, water quality, and terrestrial and aquatic habitat are adversely affected by recreation, grazing, mining, construction, and other soil-compacting and surface-disturbing activities.

Issue 4: Historical and archaeological resources are adversely affected by other resource uses.

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Issue 5: Scenic quality is threatened by human activities and development.

Issue 6: Recreation is a major and growing use of the planning area that often conflicts with other public and private resource uses.

Issue 7: Providing opportunities for commercial and personal uses of public land in the planning area conflicts with protecting natural and scenic resources.

Issue 8: The public requires access to and through public land; however, this access has resulted in unauthorized use of private land, degradation of natural resources, and conflicts among users.

Issue 9: Determining proper levels of resource interpretation and public education regarding resource use.

DESIRED FUTURE CONDITIONS

In addition to the issues identified above, BLM worked closely with the public to develop desired future conditions for the planning area. Following is a brief description of how the land and its uses would likely appear to an observer 15 or more years in the future. What the desired future condition of the planning area would be with implementation of the Final Plan.

Protection and Enhancement of Natural, Historic, Archaeologic and Scenic Resources

The landscape supports a diverse, healthy, natural system represented by native communities of vegetation with no increase in exotic plant species. Critical and crucial habitats have been maintained and enhanced. Vegetative modifications and use restrictions have improved the health of the land, including habitat, watershed function, and soil stability. Approximately 95 percent of the total riparian area is in proper functioning condition, and the acreage of riparian areas has increased. Although increased human presence has influenced vegetative communities and wildlife populations, the impacts on these resources have been mitigated.

Scenic quality continues to be highly valued, enjoyed by visitors and residents, and has been maintained or enhanced throughout the area. Visual Resource Management (VRM) classes have been assigned to protect critical viewsheds. A number of archaeological and historic sites have been identified,

documented, stabilized, and interpreted in response to increased visitation.

Recreation and Facility Development

A variety of high-quality recreational opportunities exist. BLM constructed new or remodeled facilities to blend in with the natural landscape at the Lobatos Bridge, Wild Rivers and Orilla Verde recreation areas, and selected Lower Gorge sites. These facilities are now farther from the river/shoreline. In some areas, facilities have been eliminated to meet resource needs.

Although access to the Rio Grande is limited in some areas, visitors continue to find opportunities for solitude. Recreational use is restricted in some locations and managed to maintain uncrowded conditions. BLM actions to control recreational use and access (e.g., signing, public information, enforcement, and allocations) have resulted in reduced conflict between users, landowners and native species.

The Wild Rivers and Orilla Verde recreation areas and selected parts of the Racecourse Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) accommodate intensive levels of recreation use; are clean, safe, attractive, well-maintained; and provide access for public land users (including those with disabilities). The demand for full-service camping is met by private industry on private land.

Opportunities for Commercial and Personal Uses

These uses within the corridor are compatible with sustained biodiversity, a healthy ecosystem, and scenic quality. The BLM provides recreational opportunities and emergency services, protects natural resources and cultural values, and resolves user conflicts in partnership with local governments, state and federal agencies, tribal governments, and private landowners.

Public Access

Public access to the Rio Grande has been limited, but is provided in other areas where impacts on wildlife and riparian vegetation are minimal.

Interpretation and Public Education

The BLM shares responsibility for stewardship with residents, communities, visitors, and providers of commercial recreation services to benefit public and private land. The presence of agency staff on the ground enhances public safety and customer service.

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From the issues and the desired future condition statements, a Draft Plan was formulated, presenting four alternative approaches to managing the public lands in the Rio Grande Corridor. Following the conclusion of the comment period on the Draft Plan in October 1997 and the subsequent analysis of the comments, a Proposed Plan was released in September 1998. The Proposed Plan included a mixture of the actions/prescriptions from various alternatives presented in the draft. The protest period for the Proposed Plan ended in October 1998 and minor

adjustments were made to develop the Final Plan. There were no changes to the RMP amendments outlined in the Proposed Plan.

The issuance of the Record of Decision (ROD) and Final Plan completes the planning process. The next steps are implementation of the actions, preparation of individual project plans, and monitoring/evaluating the results so necessary adjustments in our implementation can be made to better achieve the desired future condition.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Public opinion has been sought frequently since the inception of this plan in 1994. Public participation efforts are described in detail on pages 5-4 and 5-5 of the Proposed Plan. A summary of the public involvement process follows:

- C Preparation of a public participation plan;
- C Federal Register notices of intent and availability;
- C Numerous formal and informal meetings with stakeholders, with many of the meetings conducted by contracted facilitators;
- C Interaction with citizen work groups in communities near the Rio Grande;

- C Planning updates and informational mailings;
- C Formal public hearings and a total of 177 days (including 2 extensions) to review the Draft Plan/EIS;
- C Numerous briefings with neighborhood associations and local, county, and state agencies; and
- C A 30-day protest period (for RMP-level actions) and informal protest period (for Activity-level actions). The informal protest period was an additional opportunity for public input that is not a normal part of the process.

IMPLEMENTATION

Progress on the Final Plan's implementation will be reported annually to the public. Persons adversely affected by the implementation of a specific action may appeal the implementation of that action.

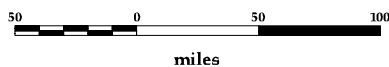
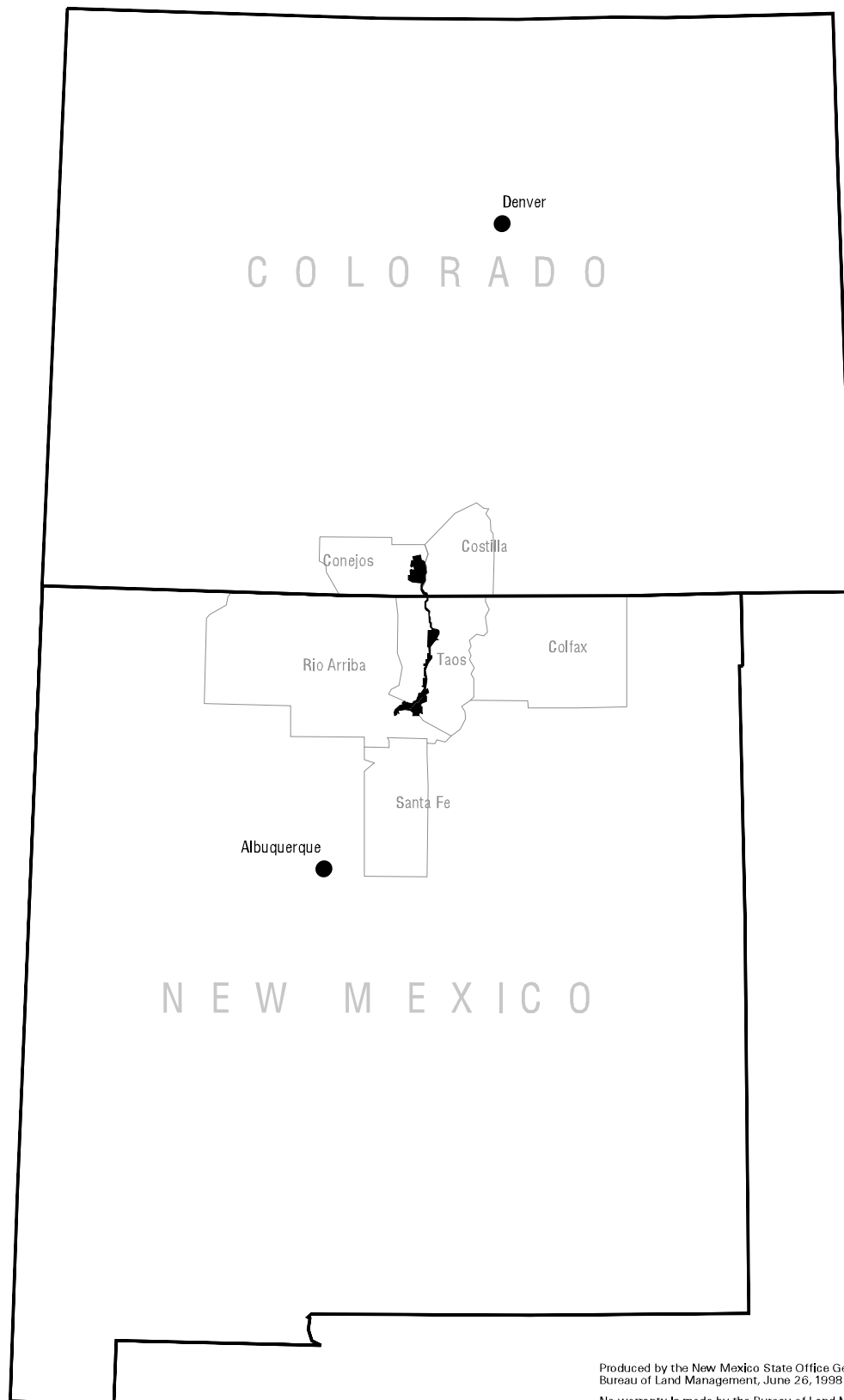
Appeals must be made to the Interior Board of Land Appeals (in accordance with 43 CFR 4.400-4.704) when the action is proposed for implementation.

LIFE OF THE PLAN

The life of the plan is expected to be 15 years. The Final Plan attempts to provide for adaptive management as additional or unexpected challenges surface and new information becomes available. The success

of adaptive management will be determined by the willingness of stakeholders to work together to resolve conflicts.

Map 1
Planning Area Location
Rio Grande Corridor
Coordinated Resource Management Plan



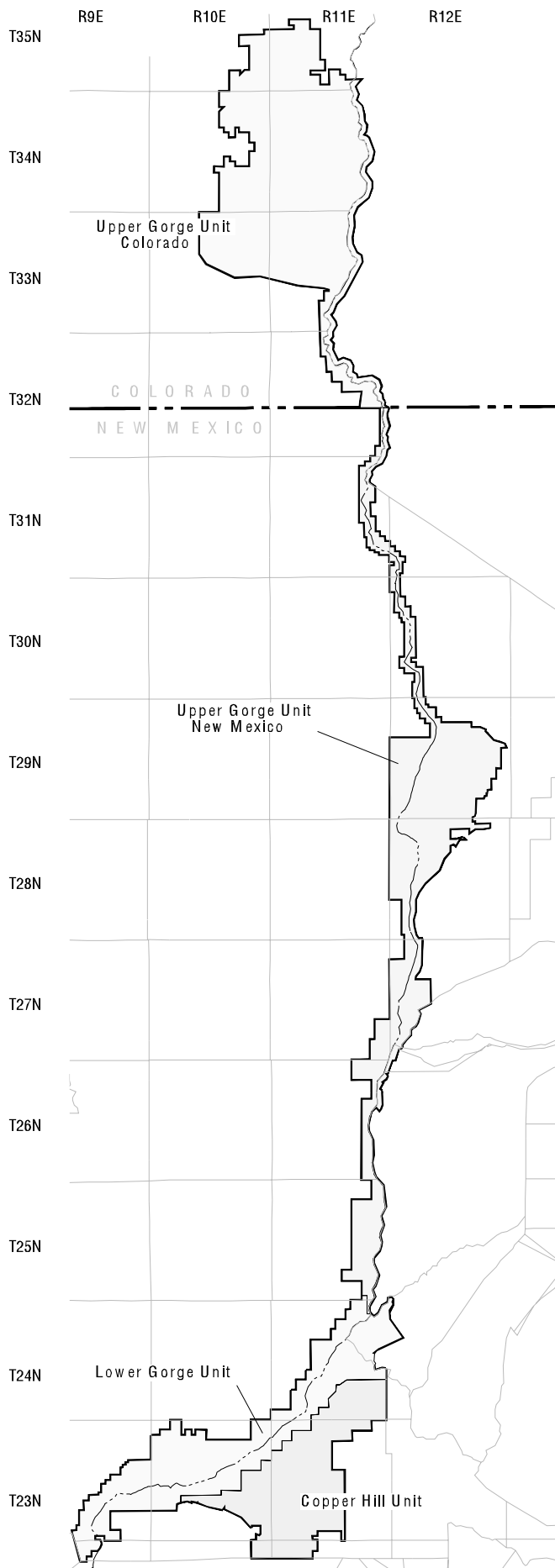
Produced by the New Mexico State Office Geographic Sciences Team,
Bureau of Land Management, June 26, 1998






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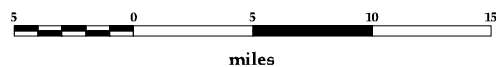
Map 2

Planning Units

Rio Grande Corridor Coordinated Resource Management Plan



-  Planning Area Boundary
-  Unit Boundary
-  State Boundary
-  Rio Grande
-  Township and Range or Grant Line



Produced by the New Mexico State Office Geographic Sciences Team,
Bureau of Land Management, August 03, 1998

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DESCRIPTION OF THE PLANNING AREA

Upper Gorge

The Upper Gorge begins at the La Sauses Cemetery in Colorado, 22 miles north of the Colorado-New Mexico state line, and extends for about 47 miles along the Rio Grande to its confluence with the Rio Pueblo. In the northern part of the unit, the Rio Grande flows past cliffs as high as 100 feet. The San Luis Hills are the main geographic feature to the west, rising up to 900 feet above the plateaus surrounding the river. To the east are private lands (not included within the planning area).

Eight miles north of the state line, the Lobatos Bridge marks the beginning of the Rio Grande Gorge. Here the river cuts into the lava flows characteristic of the Taos Plateau. By the time the river reaches New Mexico, the gorge is 200 feet wide and about 150 feet deep. In the Wild Rivers area, the gorge is nearly 0.5 mile across and 800 feet deep. Consequently, access in this section always has been limited to a few foot trails descending into the gorge and even fewer roads suitable for vehicles. Limited access and varied habitat have enabled significant populations of raptors, waterfowl, and fish to flourish. Boaters often refer to this upper part of the gorge as the "Ute Mountain Run." Lee Trail marks the last place boaters get out of the river before reaching more difficult rapids on the Rio Grande.

The Wild Rivers Recreation Area is situated along 7 miles of the rim of the Rio Grande Gorge and offers some of the area's most spectacular views. The area between Chiflo and Little Arsenic is known locally as the Upper Box. This section of the Rio Grande offers some of the most difficult Class V+ whitewater rapids in the Southwest. After these rapids the river becomes more navigable and is referred to as La Junta section (La Junta is Spanish for meeting and refers to the confluence of the Rio Grande and Red River). Springs and seeps along this section add to the flow of the Rio Grande and help maintain a healthy aquatic ecosystem. Anglers hike into the canyon seeking some of the best fishing to be found on the Rio Grande.

At the John Dunn Bridge, La Junta section gives way to the Taos Box, an 18-mile-long stretch of the Rio Grande that ends at the Taos Junction Bridge. The Taos Box is a very popular Class III/IV whitewater run during spring and early summer when runoff provides adequate flows. Several historical sites and hot springs lie near the John Dunn Bridge. Wildlife

and riparian values diminish as a result of natural geographic changes, but trophy-sized trout and an occasional pike are caught in this section.

Lower Gorge

The Rio Pueblo de Taos, also called the Little Rio Grande, enters the gorge just above the Taos Junction Bridge and marks the beginning of the Lower Gorge. In contrast to the Upper Gorge where access by road is limited to a few crossings, the Lower Gorge is easily accessed by state highways along its entire length. The Lower Gorge is also much wider and more open than the Upper Gorge and provides a richer riparian environment.

The Lower Gorge has three distinct segments - Orilla Verde, the Racecourse, and the Bosque. Orilla Verde Recreation Area makes up the first 5 miles of this unit, where a paved road follows the canyon on the east side of the river. This side of the river is privately owned for approximately the first 2 miles downstream of the Rio Pueblo and Rio Grande confluence. The west side is undeveloped except for the campground at Taos Junction.

The canyon opens up slightly in the Lower Gorge and is about 700 to 800 feet deep. The gradient of the river decreases significantly in contrast to the Upper Gorge. Wildlife, particularly birds, are more abundant in this wider riparian zone, and fishing and other activities increase due to the ease of access. Just downriver from Orilla Verde is the village of Pilar, where private land borders both sides of the Rio Grande for the next mile.

The river turns abruptly southwest as it leaves Pilar and enters the Racecourse, a 5-mile-long reach with mostly BLM-managed lands bordering the river. NM 68, a major north-south route between Taos and Española, parallels the river south of Pilar. Near the junction of NM 570 and NM 68 is the Rio Grande Gorge Visitor Center with facilities for visitors to Orilla Verde and the Racecourse. About a mile north of the NM 570/68 intersection is the Pilar North Parking Area, used primarily by customers of commercial river outfitters. Three private tracts of land are located in the Racecourse segment, one of which has several homes.

The river's gradient increases in the Racecourse section as the result of the less erosive schist and quartzite that form the walls of the gorge. Numerous

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Class III rapids exist for whitewater thrill seekers. The BLM has developed two river access and recreation sites to accommodate the heavy public use of the Racecourse section (near the beginning of the Racecourse) and County Line (at the end of the Racecourse). Between these two sites is the most heavily boated section of river in New Mexico, with boating use approaching 40,000 visitors per season.

The Bosque segment of the Lower Gorge begins at the County Line Recreation Site, where the gorge again opens up and the river passes pastoral surroundings of cottonwoods, fruit orchards, and private homes that form the communities of Rinconada and Embudo. Only a few parcels of public land exist in the next 6 miles. Boating use on this section is significantly less than on the Racecourse section and mainly consists of canoeists and rafters interested in a flat-water boating experience.

The canyon narrows and turns south for the last 2 miles of the Lower Gorge, where BLM lands predominate once again. The abandoned Chili Line Railroad parallels the river on the west bank. The old train stop at Embudo Station has been converted to a restaurant/gift shop complex where the few float trips that continue below the County Line Recreation Site

leave the river. The most significant recreational use in this section is fishing. The Lower Gorge ends at the Velarde Diversion Dam.

Copper Hill

The Copper Hill area lies south and east of NM 68 and is named after Copper Hill, one of the higher peaks in this area. Several streams that drain this portion of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains characterize the unit, the most significant being the Rio Embudo. Access in much of the unit is limited by the steep, densely wooded terrain, and NM 75 is the main route.

The Embudo Box is a remote, wild section of the Rio Embudo between the NM 75 crossing and the mouth of the canyon above Cañoncito. This section of river is difficult to access and is little known except to local residents and a few avid kayakers, hikers, and anglers. The canyon possesses outstanding natural, scenic, and ecological resources.

The Agua Caliente drainage supplies irrigation water to the village of Pilar. This watershed is covered by stands of piñon, juniper, ponderosa pine, aspen, and Douglas fir, and contains noteworthy riparian habitat.

